

THE LAST COACH ON THE ROAD. A Railway Legend.

THE Tally-ho, the Express, and the Highflyer coaches had long since retired from the unprofitable contest of running between London and S—— (a retired market town some 50 miles on the western road) in competition with the railway. But there still remained the old "Independent." This coach was driven by one Joe Hart, who had smacked his whip and whistled to his team from that same coach (besides those he had worn out) for upwards of 35 years; and he was not going to be quietly driven off the road now, because a cricketty, smorting, railroad had lately started in opposition to him. No! he had run against seven-and-twenty oppositions in his time; had beaten them all; and was he now going to pull up and unskid his wheel for a railroad? No! Joe Hart had registered a deep and solemn vow, in the bottom of a pewter tankard, never to stop running the old "Independent," till the rail bought him off—aye! and handsomely too.

It was quite dismal to see the deserted old coach start on its journey without a passenger inside or out. That coach, too, which used to be so full—there was no getting a place without booking it beforehand, even the farmers had deserted the "Independent" for the rail; and at last it was quite a novelty to see a passenger on the coach at all.

Things were thus getting so bad with old Joe Hart, that he actually began to think that if the rail did not buy him off, he must go off of his own accord. As he thus ruminated late one night by the flickering light of a dim candle, before a huge fire in his own little back parlour, he was suddenly aroused by a heavy slap on his shoulder, when turning sharply round, he was rather terrified at beholding a tall, gaunt figure, wrapped in a large black cloak, which he clasped tightly round his neck. The stranger glared upon Joe with two red, piercing eyes, and speaking in a deep sepulchral voice, asked him if he was not the driver of the old "Independent."

"Yes," replied Joe, "I am."

"Ah! I thought so," answered the tall stranger. "You're the very man I want. Come; you must drive me to London, to-night. Up, quick, man! I must be off."

As he thus spoke, the stranger seized Joe by the hair, (he had not much, for he was rather bald,) and lifting him nearly as high as the ceiling, brought him heavily to the ground.

"Oh, Lord!" gasped Joe—"did you say, London, to-night!"

"I did, and I mean it, too," was the stranger's answer.

"Come along, my man: I will pay you well for the job." As he uttered these words, the stranger shook a bag of sovereigns before Joe's eyes; then lifting him up by the hair again, ran out of the house with him, and when he sat him down, Joe found himself beside his old coach in the stable-yard. The night was very cold and dark:—as he stood shivering with both cold and fright, the old church clock struck twelve!

"Come, be sharp, my man," growled the stranger.

"That's my time for starting—we ought to be moving. I have my men here, they'll soon put the horses in, only you wake up and get ready; the rest will be done for you."

Thus speaking, the stranger rubbed his bony hands, and as he did this, a quantity of bright blue dancing sparks came from between his fingers, just as if he was crushing so many lucifer matches in his hands; and by the dim spectral light which they threw out, Joe could see about half-a-dozen strange-looking little dumpy fellows running about under the wheels of the coach. Noticing his surprise, the stranger observed—

"Oh!—they're only greasing the wheels, to make 'em spin well!"

The same moment, the clattering of his horses' hoofs on the stones, caused Joe to look behind, and sure enough there was the odd little ostlers bringing out his own team. They were the queerest helpers Joe had ever seen; they were all laughing; but then it was such a laugh—it was a fiendish grin, from mouths extending from ear to ear.

Before he could well get his top coat on, the horses were all put to, the wheelers poled-up tight, and the leaders all square and trim.

"Now then, coachman," exclaimed the tall stranger, "Time's up!"

As he said this, he caught Joe by the waist, and giving him a complete summerset, pitched him all right and tight on to his box. Once there, the reins were popped into his hands by the little grinning ostlers; the gates flew open, and away galloped the team. Joe could not make it out, at all. He was too frightened to use his whip; and yet they were at full gallop. Up the main street, round by the church, across the green, and over the little hill, till the town of S—— was soon left half-a-dozen miles behind. He never saw horses go at such a pace; he pulled them in as hard as he could, to keep his seat; but the harder he pulled, the harder they galloped.

"Faster! why don't you go along?" screamed out the stranger, from the window.

At this critical juncture, Joe thought he could see lights among the horses' heels; and sure enough there were the half-dozen little ugly ostlers, running beside the horses, whipping and pricking them like fury. They seemed to go faster than the horses! Away went the whip and reins out of his hands, he clung to his box for support, and to his horror, he beheld one of the grinning little ostlers bestriding the wheelers, whip in one hand, and reins in the other, lashing like fury. The horses were one mass of white foam and steam!

"Faster, for your lives!" roared the hollow voice from inside.

Joe cast his eyes behind him, towards the ground, and saw the wheels all on fire! One of the grinning imps had got upon his shoulders, and with his legs twisted tight round his neck, was beating his hat over his face! Away they flew like lightning along the road, over the common, up and down the hills, across a bog, through a stream, and over hedges, ditches, and turnpike gates, till Joe was quite bewildered.

On a sudden, he heard a loud railway whistle—then another, and another; till there was nothing but whistles to be heard! Upon looking around him he saw long trains of carriages, with flaming engines at the head of them, coming from the right, left, and in front of him! He had just time to scream out, when they all came into a violent collision with one another—an awful crash!—coach, horses, ostlers, and all! The stranger gave a loud scream, and jumped out of the coach! The cock crew! and Joe, waking up, found himself on the floor of his own little back parlour.

—He had been dreaming!

The next night, Joe's dream was the leading topic of the assembled wissacres in the parlour of the Lion and Lamb. It created universal wonder and alarm in the minds of all hearers. Joe said he knew something would come of it: he should have an upset or a run-away job; for his dreams generally came true, in some way or other. However, it was noticed by all present, that two strangers in a far corner of the room, seemed to enjoy the thing as a good joke, and were not at all affected by the supernatural nature of the circumstance.

About a week after the recital of the dream in the parlour of the "Lion and Lamb," Joe Hart was again smoking his pipe peaceably at home; his landlady and every one in the house had retired to rest (for Joe was an old bachelor), when he was greatly alarmed by a knock at his door.

"Who's there?" he exclaimed, half-terrified; still brooding over his dream.

"A person who wants Joe Hart," was the reply.

To open the door, and admit the visitor, was but the work of a moment. After well eyeing him all over, Joe came to the conclusion that he was a real flesh and blood man, like himself; but he had seen him, he thought, somewhere before. Upon interrogation, the stranger turned out to be one of the two persons who had laughed over Joe's dream in the parlour of the "Lion and Lamb," a few evenings previous. The purport of his visit was to offer Joe Hart a good round sum to drive a party of gentlemen up to town that night. The last train had long since departed; there was not a post-chaise to be had for love or money; and Joe Hart's old "Independent" was the only possible vehicle. The money was counted out into Joe's hand, 20 bright, glittering sovereigns; and then away he went to get his horses ready for the job. As luck would have it, it was a fine moonlight night, and there were none of the little goblin ostlers about this time. So having got his team all harnessed, and everything ready, his passengers, three in number, with one or two heavy carpet bags, got inside, and away the old "Independent" rolled over the soft dusty roads of S——.

Whipping his horses into a sharp trot, Joe arrived at the first stage, about 8 miles, in something over half-an-hour. His fresh team were all put to, and he was just about to start again, when he found himself roughly handled; he was siezed by two men, a gag thrust into his mouth, and himself pitched inside the coach, where two men held him, with a pistol to his head, to keep him quiet. This was no dream; he was quite sure of that. The gag was nearly choking him, his hands were tied tight behind him, the coach was proceeding at a fearful pace, and he, Joe Hart, for the first time in his life, was riding inside!

In this state they galloped over some ten miles, until sounds of horses' feet in the rear were plainly audible. They were pursued—the speed increased—his guardians threatened to shoot him if he betrayed them—when all of a sudden,—a crash! dash!—and away went the old coach, over and over, into a shallow pond; the fore wheels had caught a gate-post—the harness and traces were torn asunder! away flew the horses, each choosing his own path, over a flat barren heath—and the two fore wheels running after them!

The passengers gathered up their traps, and were off like a shot; and two horsemen coming up directly afterwards, galloped on in pursuit, leaving old Joe Hart floundering about, his hands tied, and his mouth gagged, with the coach full of mud and water, to get out the best way he could.

Neither wheels nor horses ever returned to tell of their safety; and Joe never enquired after them; for in breaking up the old coach, he found, under the seat, a canvass bag full of notes and strange documents, which turned out to be railway shares. A noise was made about an extensive robbery which had been committed at the railway station, and the thieves were traced to be the identical passengers who had so ill-used Joe, in his own coach. The notes and shares were safely returned by Joe, who was an important witness at the trial, to identify the robbers. The railway company handsomely indemnified him for his losses, and in a short time, he took a neat little public house, near the railway station. He fell in with a buxom widow, who owned a score or two of shares, all at a premium—they were married, and Joe actually calls his house the "Railway Inn," and is brought to confess that there are worse changes in this world than Railways!

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